Lateral

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# Review of *Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation* by Jennifer Robertson (University of California Press)

by Sara Wenger | Book Reviews, Issue 10.1 (Spring 2021)

ABSTRACT Jennifer Robertson's *Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation* assesses the robot phenomenon in Japan within the last decade. Offering sustained critiques on contemporary techno-fix narratives, Robertson reveals how humanoid robots are designed and deployed to reify conservative values under the guise of technological advancements. Robertson's impressive ethnographic project weaves together robots of science fact and fiction, leaving readers to interrogate how humanoids, androids, gynoids, and cyborgs both challenge and reify existing social structures across the globe.

KEYWORDS ethnography, family, gender, human, Japan, robots, technology

*Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation*. By Jennifer Robertson. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017, 280 pp. (hardcover) ISBN: 978-0-5202-8320-6. US List: $85.

In *Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation*, Jennifer Robertson explores how robot technology operates in contemporary Japanese society. Specifically, Robertson argues humanoid robots are imagined, designed, and utilized in ways which reinforce traditional values and social structures. Robots, like other technologies, are anything but ideologically neutral—they are vastly complex, reflecting the desires of their human maker(s). Japan's robot dreams also require deep pockets to design and disperse, relying on state and corporate funding for their ongoing development. Thus, humanoid robots "both mirror and embody" state and corporate values, ideologies, and priorities which tend to reinforce the status quo (81). Robots, then, are not the solution that social elites believe them to be, bestowed with the ability to magically solve humanity's perceived problems, whether they be labor shortages, declining birth rates, unsavory effects of aging, or unhappy marriages. Through a wide array of examples, Robertson demonstrates how futuristic robot technologies are predominantly utilized to uphold and glorify conservatism. Robertson dubs this phenomenon "retro-tech," or the creation and propagation of advanced technology in the service of traditionalism (79).

From the outset, Robertson informs readers that *Robo Sapiens Japanicus* is neither an all-encompassing history of Japanese robotics nor a full-fledged critique of Japanese political administrations declaring robots as solutions to social, economic, and historical problems.

Instead, Robertson sets the text within a "spatiotemporal framework," conducting fieldwork and archival research on "robot-human coexistence in Japan and elsewhere at various times over the past decade" (29). Narratives on human-machine interactions from Japanese roboticists, politicians, corporations, and ordinary citizens are critically examined, unveiling the ideologically conservative discourses behind recent robotic initiatives. Innovation 25, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's proposal to remake Japanese society by 2025, is one example of conservative techno-fixes imagined via advanced robotics. Abe's vision of a robotized society includes an illustration entitled "A Day in the Life of the Inobe Family," where human-robot coexistence is shown as the norm through the highly gendered labor of humanoid robots.

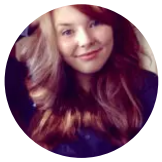
Throughout her text, Robertson expertly compares the robots of reality to those of fiction, demonstrating how non-fictional robots are less exciting and capable than their fantastic prototypes. Intricate machines once found at the center of science fiction stories appear woefully one-dimensional and archetypal in real life, upholding "existing affective and corporate frameworks" of the household and workplace (144). Robertson subsequently notes how robots are "good to imagine and dream about, but more difficult to build" (48). These difficulties lie at the heart of Robertson's ethnographic project: robots of *certain* imaginations—i.e., living in the minds of designers, marketers, politicians, and corporations—are wholly unextraordinary, falling short of popularized technological fantasies. Non-fictional robots reify existing social norms and values, giving way to traditional campaigns, marketing efforts, and public initiatives, further igniting false promises and "visionary scenarios of human-robot coexistence" (31).

As the text's subtitle suggests, issues related to gender and family serve as focal points for Robertson's analysis. Drawing on her extensive anthropological background, she highlights the ways in which Japan's robot revolution is not revolutionary at all. In "Families of Future Past" and "Embodiment and Gender," Robertson illustrates how both gender and family roles are continually influenced by the development of humanoid robots and vice versa. For example, Robertson discusses how male roboticists generally misunderstand the sex/gender system, further legitimizing gendered and sexualized divisions of labor which associate women with the household or private sphere. Even so-called "gender-neutral" robots are not free of these divisions, trapped in a material body that is almost always gendered in some way. Robertson's thorough analysis of both androids and gynoids—as well as the many variations therein—underscores her profound interest in the social relevance of robot technologies in Japan and beyond. In the penultimate chapter focused on cyborg-ableism, Robertson shows how and why disability-focused narratives, experiences, and expertise matter in robotics research. However, I believe Robertson's analysis of both gender and cyborg-ableism would have benefited from deeper engagements with contemporary scholars working on similar projects, including but not limited to cyborg theory, disability and technology studies, and sociocultural theories of technology.

In her conclusion, Robertson finds a way to leave readers hopeful without indulging in whimsical robot dreams. Readers trained or interested in anthropology, science and technology studies, or sociology will surely find Robertson's text satisfying, as well as scholars in the interdisciplinary fields of feminist science studies and cultural studies. Ultimately, Robertson's text is just as timely in 2021 as it was in 2017: Abe's call for a reinvented Japan by 2025 reflects similar robot narratives presented across the globe, including China's "Made in China 2025" plan and the United States' Department-of-Defense-funded Advanced Robotics for Manufacturing (ARM) consortium. If there is one

lesson to take away from Robertson's ethnographic project, it is the haunting realization that there are no readily-available techno-fixes for humanity's problems, whether they be in the form of household robots, carebots, or any other futuristic companions.

# Author Information




## Sara Wenger

Sara Wenger is a third-year PhD candidate in Political and Social Thought at Virginia Tech. She earned an MA in Women's Studies from the University of Alabama. Her scholarly interests include Black speculative fiction, feminist technoscience, and sex technologies.

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### Article details

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